

Jet engine fire downs Neptune aircraft, killing 3

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By SCOTT SONNER of the Associated Press

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RENO, Nev. - A jet engine fire engulfed the wing of a Neptune Aviation air tanker moments after takeoff, sending the plane rolling into the ground and killing all three members of the Missoula-based firefighting crew, a federal investigator said Tuesday night.

The Lockheed P2V-7 aircraft, on the way to drop retardant on a California wildfire, was between 100 and 300 feet off the ground when it crashed less than two miles from the Reno-Stead Airport on Monday evening, said Tom Little, lead investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board.

Little said nothing indicates pilot error played a role in the crash, which brings to 27 the number of deaths in fatal crashes of firefighting air tankers in the U.S. since 1991.

Two witnesses confirmed the fire was from the jet engine, Little told reporters at the airport north of Reno on Tuesday night.

Investigators recovered several large pieces of metal north of the runway that appear to have come from the burning engine, he said.

“It appears it had disintegrated and subsequently left the aircraft. We know there was a fire on board the aircraft,” Little said.

“We just are at a loss right now as to why, No. 1, the engine caught on fire, and No. 2, what caused the loss of control of the aircraft?” he said. “That is what the focus of the investigation will be over the next six to nine months.”

Casey Meaden, who lives near the airport, said she was watching the plane take off when she noticed an engine was on fire.

“It didn't seem like he was getting much altitude,” she said. “It was a little while after it got into the air. I could see it was off the ground. I said, ‘Oh, my God! That thing is on fire.’”

The full article in the Missoulian September 2, 2008